



Election Watch TEIM
ELECTORAL PROFILE:
SYRIA/Legislatives
April 22nd-23rd, 2007

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Background of the elections:

The elections have been held in a tense atmosphere. They have been preceded by a call for a boycott from all the opposition fronts to the regime. The organisations of the opposition that are stronger in the heart of the country, that is, the Syrian Democratic Coalition (CDS) and the bloc of the Damascus Declaration (a coalition made of 16 parties and independent intellectuals) called for a boycott through abstentions in order to demand a project of democratic reform where a new electoral law can be included and the legalisation of all parties. From the exile, the National Salvation Front for Syria, a coalition formed by the Muslim Brothers and the former president Abdul Ḥalīm Khaddām, summed up to this initiative with the aim of promoting a collapse of the system. Finally, few days before the elections, the Kurdish parties joined the boycott too.

Democracy quantitative indices:

Syria is classified in the following ranking of democratic fulfilment.

Measurement	Name and year of the report or data base	Institution	Index	Ranking and Classification
Political rights and freedom	Freedom House Report 2007	Freedom House	PR: Political Rights; CL: Civil Liberties	PR: 7 CL: 7 Scale 1-7 Status: not free
Democratic degree of the elections	Polyarchy 2.0 2007	Peace Research Institute of Oslo and Tatu Vanhanen	DI: Synthetic Democratic Index; Part: Participation; Comp.: Competition	DI: 21.53 (max. 49); Part. 32.2 (max. 70); Comp. 6.93* (max. 70); (Democracy minimum: DI: 5; Part.: 10; Comp.: 30) Classification: Democratic*
Consolidation of the democratic and authoritarian institutions	Polity IV 2007	Center for International Development and Conflict Management, Univ. of Maryland	Democracy: consolidation of democratic institutions; Autocracy: authoritarian consolidation; Polity: synthesis of both	Democracy: 0 Autocracy: 9 Polity: 9 (Scale: +10: very democratic to -10: very authoritarian) Classification: non democratic
Corruption perception	Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2007	Transparency International	TICPI: Corruption Perception	TICPI: 2.4 over 10 (Scale: 1 very corrupt to 10 not corrupted) Country rank: 138/179
Management of political and economic change	Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2006	Bertelsmann Foundation	MI: Management Index, quality of management change	MI: 2.85 over 10 Ranking : 144 over 119 countries; Classification: management with little success
Democracy, including freedom and corruption	World Democracy Audit 2007	World Audit	World Democracy Rank: political freedom (FH) + press and corruption (TI)	WDA rank: 134 of 150 countries; 4th division of 4

** In the Syrian case, the independent candidates do not form the opposition. In reality, they are representatives of the elite, normally the economic one, akin to the regime, and thus, regardless the formal result, it cannot be called a democratic system.

Definition of the Electoral System and Parties:

Theoretically, Syria has a multiple party one round system, with direct elections for both legislative and municipal elections. Anyhow, in practice, it is a system of a hegemonic party. The law of the parties restricts the electoral participation to those that take part in the National Progressive Front¹ (FNP), a coalition of about

¹ The foundation act of the FNP dates back to 1971, and it is the government who decides which parties can enter or not the FNP, through the electoral law. We must mention that nevertheless,

9 or 10 parties (the number varies with the years) of Arab-Nationalist leanings. Since 1980, the electoral law establishes that 167 seats of the 250 in parliament must be assigned to the FNP, that is, 2/3 of it. The rest, 83 seats, rest in the independents' hands. This coalition though is absolutely controlled by the Ba'ath. According to Art 8 of the Constitution, the Ba'ath must lead the Syrian society and the state. This means that among other things, it is only the Ba'ath the one that has positioned the 131 seats assigned to the FNP. Likewise, it is this party lead by the President whose competence is designating the presidential candidate.²

Simultaneously, the Art 53 of the Constitution states that 50% of the seats must be in the hands of peasants and members of the working class.

On the other side, the electoral system functions through the formula of the Block vote³ where the voter must vote for as many candidates as those in its circumscription. Thus, they vote for a candidate, not for a party. The electoral threshold is 5% respecting to the total of voters registered by circumscription.

Impact of the electoral procedure and size of circumscriptions on elections:

The Syrian electoral law divides the country into 15 electoral circumscriptions. These correspond with the 13 administrative governments, together with the cities of Damascus and Aleppo.⁴ Each of these cities makes up for a single electoral district besides that of its province. If we establish the fashion related to the size of the circumscriptions, we get 14 big ones. It is supposed that with a circumscription fashion higher than 10, they do not have any impact on the proportionality degree of the system⁵.

In the concrete case of Syria, the opposition is very critical with the size of the circumscriptions. They consider that it hardens access to the Parliament of local and regional elites and at the same time, it favours the economically stronger candidatures or those who enjoy the governmental support or the Ba'ath. That is, those who have the capacity of promotion.

About the electoral formula, we must take into consideration that the inner characteristics of the Block-Vote system are later added the peculiarities of the Syrian system. The voter must bear in mind the division of 50% between

there are other small political parties, 15 more or less, that are not legalised and have no access to the institutions.

² Such candidature must be afterwards ratified by the People's Assembly, and finally, set for popular referendum.

³ The denomination of the electoral systems are the ones used by IDEA, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, more concretely see the Electoral System Design in its web site: <http://www.idea.int/esd/world.cfm>

⁴ This means that the provinces of Damascus and Aleppo make up a total of 4 electoral circumscriptions. For Damascus, we can find on one side, Damascus city, with 29 seats, and from the other, Damascus the Muhafaza of the Rif, that is, the rural milieu of the province, that only has 19 seats. In the Aleppo case, we have the city of Aleppo, with 20 seats, and from the other, its province with 32 seats assigned.

⁵ Agustí Bosch thus explains: "It is estimated that the systems with single-nominal circumscriptions produce a disproportional index that almost doubles that of the small (multi-nominal) circumscriptions (2-6 seats) and that these produce disproportional indexes that also double those of the medium circumscriptions (6-10 seats). On the other side, the systems with higher circumscriptions do not improve proportionality in a substantial way" (A. Bosch, *Guide of the Electoral System*, Publication Services of the Universidad Aut3noma de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2004, pp. 21.

peasants and members of the working class on one side, and members of other occupations. Thus, the ballot papers have two empty spaces, one for the candidates belonging to the peasant and working sectors, and another for the rest. Following this distribution, the voter must clearly handwrite the names of as much candidates as seats assigned by the circumscription. If the ballot paper cannot clearly be read, or does not count with the proper proportionality, it is cancelled, what makes fraud easier.

In practice, the importance of the electoral formula is very relative, given that the results are distorted as a consequence of the already mentioned distribution of the seats in parliament. Being whatever it is the result, a minimum of two-thirds of the members of parliament will belong to the FNP.

Election results:

PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY	Number of seats
Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (<i>Hizb al-Ba'ath a-'Arabī al-Ištirāqī</i>)	135
Arab Socialist Union (<i>al-Ittiḥād al-Ištirāqī al-'Arabī</i>)	
Arab Socialist Movement (<i>al-Ḥaraka al-Ištirāqī al-'Arabī</i>)	
Communist Party of Syria (<i>al-Ḥizb as-Šuju'i as-Sūrī</i>) Bakdaš faction	
Communist Party of Syria (<i>al-Ḥizb as-Šuju'i as-Sūrī</i>) Faisāl faction	
Socialist Unionists (<i>al-Waḥdawiyun al-Ištiraqiyūn</i>)	
Syrian Social Nationalist Party (<i>al-Ḥizb as-Sūrī al-Qaumī al-Ijtimā'ī</i>)	
Democratic Socialist Unionist Party (<i>al-Ḥizb al-Waḥdawī al-Ištirākī ad-Dimuqrātī</i>)	
National Vow Movement (<i>Ḥaraka al-Aḥd al-Waṭanī</i>)	
Total amount of seats National Progressive Force (FNP) (without the Ba'ath)	37*
Total Seats FNP	172
Independent candidates	78
Total seats	250
Participation	56.12%

Source: Official News Agency SANA, 26th April 2007

* We have opted for showing the seats of the FNP, not with the Ba'ath altogether, because it is the only official data for the moment

The independent candidates have lost 5 seats passing from 83 to 78. As a consequence, the Ba'ath and the FNP control now 172 seats. In this sense, it has broken with the manner of reserving 83 seats to the independent candidates to the FNP.

Besides, according to what the opposition considers, there have hardly been any new elements in parliament. Even many of the new members of parliament are well known by the regime, people that have held previous important political or institutional duties. Ammar Sa'ati for example, is the leader of the Students Union and Muḥammad Farūq Abū aš-Šamat, on his side, is the director of the Ba'ath in Damascus.

Evaluation analysis of the elections:⁶

Participatory: the polling stations remained open between 7am till 8pm on Sunday and from 7am and 2pm on Monday 23rd. As much as 10,903 offices for voting were fit out.

According to the official news agency of the country – SANA –, out of 11,967,611 citizens entitled for voting, 7,924,816 acquired his voting card. From them all, the government refused the right to vote to 516,360 candidates. Finally, 4,157,626 people voted. In sum, the participation data are polemic. While the government gives a figure of 56.12%, the opposition reduces it to 7%.

Competitive: the electoral law fixes a minimum of 167 seats assigned to the FNP. Thus, there is only a real competition for a third of the seats, those reserved for independent candidates. Nevertheless, according to the opposition, not even in this case the competition is real, given that the government prevents access to those undesirable candidates through diverse mechanisms. The creation of electoral lists, the public and logistic support of the Ba'ath to certain candidates; in given areas; the challenge of undesirable candidatures through the Interior Ministry, etc.

Cleanness: right before the elections, the opposition drew attention on several anomalies. At first, the official news agency SANA informed about 9,000 candidates. Nevertheless, on Friday 18th such organism was considering 2,500 without any explanation on the difference.

After the elections, at

http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector_english/, where there was an exhaustive electoral monitoring, those irregularities committed by the government during the electoral process are analysed. From one side, it assures that the Ba'ath party forced its members to vote to certain independent candidates, in order to weaken what they considered undesirable candidates. In the same way, many polling stations, especially those in the north and in rural areas, would not have respected the pre-established timetable, closing its doors before the scheduled time.

In this web as well, it is assured that in different circumscription points of the Rikkah, there were serious quarrels generated by the inner rivalries among the local elites.

Representation and Debate: the representability of the parties in Syria is still one of the most criticised elements during the electoral processes in this country. The political parties that have an institutional representation are only those that the government consider appropriate, that is to say the 10 that conform the FNP. In respect to the political debate in the media, there has hardly been any. In January 2007, a reform of the electoral law followed, after what access to the official media of the independent candidates was allowed. Nonetheless, the media hardly followed the electoral campaign and finally, it has basically limited itself to the exhibition of party's signboards.

⁶ In this sector the six criteria defined by TEIM are being used. These are: Participation, Competition, Cleanness, Representation and Debate, Openness and Relevance. See main page for an explanation of each.

Openness: during the last congress of the Ba'ath in 2005, a possible overture of the institutional participation to new political parties was considered. Two years later though, there was no change. The single political parties that had access to the camera have been those in the FNP.

Besides, on January 3rd 2007, the government introduced each of the reforms to the electoral law. From one side, as we already mentioned, it was allowed that the independent candidates would present its candidature in the official media. In second place, the amount that each candidate could spend on its electoral campaign was reduced to 3 million Syrian liras (about 60,000 dollars). The government claimed that with this measure, it tried to stop corruption and limit the differences between workers and peasants and those candidates belonging to liberal professions. Anyway, the real reach of these measures have practically been insignificant.

Relevance: these elections hardly had any relevance, given that the few changes produced have only strengthened the government and its control over the legislative organ.

Consequences and impact on the political system:

These elections have not had any impact on the Syrian political system. It will thus keep functioning the same way.

International political reactions and implications:

The legislative elections in Syria have hardly drawn any attention from the international community. The majority of Western administrations either has not spoken about it or have criticised the lack of credibility of the process.

On April 24th, the spokesperson of the White House, Dana Perino declared *'the 22 and 23rd of April, president Bašar has broken his word on reforms with these elections of empty content'*⁷.

Governments like the Canadian one or even the Jordanian, also showed their disagreement with the electoral Syrian process, as it is mentioned in the web http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector_english/

As a summary, the electoral result has hardly had any incidence for Syria on its international dimension.

Implications for Spain:

These elections do not have any implication for relations between Syria and Spain. They mean no change for the interior policy of the country, what means that the foreign action of the Syrian government will not undergo any changes, at least not derived from the electoral results.

The Spanish diplomatic activity in this country is carried out under the framework of the Spanish policy towards the Middle East, with special attention to the Lebanon this year. With this aim, Moratinos has visited the country several times since summer 2006, trying to get a higher cooperation of Syria in the

⁷ L' Orient le Jour, 25/04/2007

stabilisation of the area. In this sense, it must be said that the chief of the Spanish diplomacy is a welcomed negotiator in Damascus, probably thanks to the attitude that the Spanish diplomat has had towards Syria. Moratinos has always publicly defended the need of a dialogue with the Syrian regime even in those moments of strong international isolation of the country.

Thus, we believe that in the absence of visible changes in the system, the relations between Spain and Syria will follow the same line. In fact, it is very possible that during the coming months, contacts between both administrations may increase, not as a consequence of the electoral results, but related to the decisive events that can happen in the region. We mostly refer to the presidential election in Lebanon, and to the Project for the establishment of peace talks between Israel and some of its neighbours, that George Bush announced for autumn 2007.

Conclusions:

In short, the legislative elections of April 2007 have not been more than the dramatisation of a ritual that has hardly had any real impact over the political, institutional or social evolution of the country. The single change that these elections have favoured is the increase of 5 more seats to the FNP, what means that there is a higher presence of the government in the camera.

On the other side, it should be mentioned that the high level of abstention the opposition spoke about, although true, could not be interpreted as a sign of regime contesting. The wide backing that the President received after the referendum celebrated on May 27th, that is, just one month after these legislative elections, refutes this theory.

References of two different internet based analysis of the elections.

Analysis of the opposition platform Syrian Elector:
http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector_english/2007/05/the_syrian_legi.html

Analysis of *Intekhabāt* (Elections) organism that analyses the electoral processes in the Arab World: <http://www.intekhabat.org/look/en-article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrArticle=2638&NrIssue=2&NrSection=4>

Analysis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:
http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Syria_APS.doc